

Rethinking the Equality of Educational Opportunities: A Philosophical Dialogue

Samuel Alfayo Boh, Ph.D

Department of Educational Foundations
Federal University of Kashere
Gombe, Gombe State
samuelalfayoboh02@gmail.com

Abstract

It is fair to say that everybody should be afforded equal education opportunities. Consideration has to be made for the situation in which the concept of equality of education has been advocated. There is no country in which there is so much abundance of resources that every citizen can take for himself as much as he wants without threatening the ration of others. Since resources are limited and people's demands are unlimited, there will always be the issue of fair way of distributing the resources. The term equality does not mean the same thing to everybody; and it is not applicable in human affairs. There is no way in which two people can be exactly equal. Legal equality in which everybody is considered to be equal before the law does not apply in the idea of fair and humane treatment. Legally every child has the right to attend any government school, but where a school has stipulated number to admit, then examination results is considered. In other words, admission must be done on merit. Equality of educational opportunities presupposes the awareness of the importance of education and the need for members of society to have access to equal educational opportunities.

Keywords: rethinking, equality, educational, opportunities, philosophical, dialogue

Introduction:

If one asks people to comment on what they feel is the major problem in Nigeria today, most people will mention economic problem. But the Nigerian poverty is not in economic terms alone. Poverty is a very complex phenomenon embracing the economic, social, political, spiritual, intellectual and cultural dimensions. In this way, a few people will think illiteracy is the major problem of Nigeria. We may therefore give credit to such people in the sense that education is the key to the "big box" of nature that contains wealth, social status, political achievement, personal happiness and the realization of one's core-self. Ali (2020) states clearly that literacy is an enabling skill that opens up avenues of personal development. This is why any effort at reducing or eliminating economic and cultural underdevelopment must be accompanied by a proportional effort at eradicating illiteracy. Efforts at creating a democratic and political culture must take cognizance of mass literacy. The notion of equality of educational opportunities presupposes the awareness of the importance of education and democratic egalitarian tendency for individual members of society to have access to equal educational opportunities. This write up intends to see if such a demand is attainable.

Equality: A conceptual analysis

The term equality does not mean the same thing to everybody. Samuel (2018) posits that equality implies claim for just and impartial administration of laws; claim that law should not favour one class and an individual; claim for equal division of comforts and discomforts of life. To Mau (2017), "an idea consists in the belief that things can be alike and when alike they should receive equal treatment". The explication of the concept of equality as stated above can be considered in different dimensions namely from political, economic, legal, religious and educational points of view. From political point of view, human beings are said to be equal creatures of God. In the legal sense, every citizen should be considered equal before the law and be given the same treatment. But sometimes wealth is a decisive factor.

The motive for equality in education

It is fair to say that everybody should be afforded equal educational opportunities. First, the situation in which the concept of equality of education has been advocated should be considered. There is no country in which there is so much abundance of resources that every citizen can take for himself as much as he wants without threatening the ration of others. This means that since resources are limited, since people's demands are unlimited, there will always be the issue of fair way of distributing the resources. The distribution of educational facilities is an important issue in all countries since inequality in other areas of a country's life is often blamed on the system of education. This is why many nations have often looked to education to solve major problems raised in other areas of the national life.

Education is therefore regarded as an instrument for eliminating the social and economic inequality between the rich and the poor. According to Ayo (2016), ideas of free education have been advocated as a measure to eliminate educational, political and economic inequalities. The introduction of comprehensive schools was aimed at affording various abilities in a diversified curriculum under the same roof. This was also to eliminate the notion of associating certain subjects with pupils of low intelligence. As Ade (2017) rightly puts it, equality in education is often considered from three angles. The first of these is the principle of absolute equality which claims that all men are equal. When people assert that all men are equal, what they mean is that all men ought to be treated the same way. But even if all men are to be treated the same way, it cannot be accepted that if children in class five are to run 200 metres then a lame child who is a member of the same class should run. Again, in some cases, a teacher may have to bring to the front seat a child who has hearing difficulty. In other words, even if we ought to have to treat people the same, we ought to have exceptional cases.

The second angle is equality of consideration. In order to tackle the problem of absolute equality, the principle of equality of consideration has been suggested. Equality of consideration suggests that men should be treated differently if there are relevant grounds of doing so. Equality of consideration agrees with Simon (2018) principle of distributive justice which states that "injustice results just as much from treating unequal equal as it

does from treating equals unequally". The problem with this principle is that it is not easy to identify relevant differences that demand unequal treatment. Yet, some differences may be relevant and obvious. For example, in the hospital, a pregnant woman at labour may be given a more prompt attention than a patient with a toothache. But in education, since its purposes are many and diverse, there is no agreement on what constitutes relevant factors to be given different treatment.

The third angle is equality of educational opportunities. The principle of equality of educational opportunities has been proposed in order to distribute educational places to competing candidates. Equality of educational opportunities assumes that men are unequal and therefore ought to be given unequal positions with the procedure for selection being in a way that equally applies to everyone. It requires that accidental obstacles to achievement should be removed to enable each person rise as far as his talents will allow. Accidental obstacles such as family background, social class, race, ethnic group, colour and religion are not emphasized so that individuals can achieve by merit. The emphasis on meritocracy assumes that members of the lower class or disadvantaged group who are more intelligent than members of the higher class will gain more from the available educational opportunities. The notion of equality of educational opportunities can be likened to running a hundred metres race where six or eight participants take position on the same horizontal line and the starter makes sure they start off at the same time following a command. Their arrival at the bracing line indicates first, second, third and so on, each clocking a different period of time. The participants are given equal opportunity to run and are treated in the same way but in the end only few of them benefit from the prizes designated for the winners.

However, as Wale (2015) sees it, accidental factors should not be considered as obstacles to educational achievement. The reason being that it is not the child's fault that his father is poor or that he is born black, or that his parents are Christians or Moslems. Justice therefore demands that such factors should be compensated. Some years ago, some school proprietors used to deny brilliant children admission on the basis of such children's religious background. The principle of equality of educational opportunities has ruled this as are other accidental factors that the principle has ignored. The child does not choose his intellectual capacity which is determined by heredity and environment. Again, the principle does not allow educational resources to be allocated to a student whose limited capacity would not allow him to benefit from the resources. Also, there are some students who may need reading glasses from their tender age and there may be some that need hearing apparatus which if not provided will impede such children's educational achievement. Their poor and illiterate parents may not discover the defects not to mention their ability to provide for the defects.

Some attempts made to eliminate inequality in education

Various attempts and suggestions have been made to alleviate the problem of educational inequality in Nigeria. First, it has been suggested that special funds should be spent to provide educational opportunities for educationally backward areas; Quota system was

proposed in which admission into federal funded institutions should be allocated on state basis. In other words, admission of candidates in the disadvantaged states should not necessarily be based on merit. This measure, certainly, discriminates against brilliant students who happen to have come from the so-called advantaged states. The schools of Basic Studies were established to produce qualified candidates for university entry. It can be seen that the first attempt, namely the issue of special funds, quota system and Joint Admission and Matriculation Board, only violated the principle of fairness and justice. According to Yohanna (2012), the term equality is not applicable in human affairs. There is no way in which two people can be equal. Legal equality in which everybody is considered to be equal before the law does not apply in the idea of fair and humane treatment. Legally, every child has the right to attend any government school, but where a school has stipulated number to admit, the issue of examination results is considered. In other words, admission must be done on merit without favoritism. In this case, the son of a farmer may be more qualified than that of a professor or minister.

Equal right to education

Equality of educational opportunities in another dimension can be understood to refer to two major ways: "Equal right to education" and "the right to equal education". Kam (2016) opined that, with respect to equal right to education, it is humanly difficult to imagine how equal right to anything is possible. Equal right can better be understood as used in legal field where it implies that everyone is equal before the law. The claim for equal right stems from social and political equality demanded by common citizenship. If all citizens are not equal then there is no sense talking about equal right to education; what they may be understood to mean is that nobody should be denied access or entry into any institution of learning. However, having accessibility to educational institution does not mean much. It does not consider the ability of the students; it ignores the quality of the education to be attained; it does not consider the society for which education is planned. As Gani (2017) correctly puts it, equal right to education is potential right which may or may not be claimed.

Society discharges its obligations when it has established schools and urged that everybody should attend. This does not in any way imply that everybody is going to benefit equally from the opportunity made available. Children are not compelled to seek admission to the schools that are provided for them. In fact, due to lack of awareness, there are some groups in the society that do not believe in the power of education to solve their problems. There are some who would prefer their children to work on the farm or contribute to the economy of the family through petty trading, cattle grazing etc. There are many parents who still consider their daughters as potential economic assets and school as a way of destabilizing their source of income when in the end the daughter may get pregnant and, in most cases, her attempt to remove the pregnancy may cost her life. Those groups of people may prefer to lose their right to education.

From the above discussion it can be deduced that the ideals of equal right to education can not materialize. Even if everybody is given equal right of access to education, not

everybody can be assured a fair chance of success. Those who are better in intelligence will carry most of the prizes.

The right to equal education

The right to equal education may be understood to mean making the procedures and processes of education equal. In Victor's (2017) understanding, this measure means taking some steps to make sure each candidate is given enough opportunity to acquire education. It implies providing the same type of schools, enough staffing, adequate instructional materials in the same environment for learning. It also implies removing obvious and incidental obstacles that could impede the use of educational opportunities. Such steps should include making education free in all aspects, free tuition, free uniform, free books, providing breakfast and lunch. There may be the need to pay some parents some allowances so that they can allow their wards to go to school since children help their parents in contributing to the family economy.

When all these opportunities are offered, children's ability to take advantage of them varies widely in a way that reflects such influences as socio-economic status, the quality of family life, the medical and nutritional care of the child, among others. Daniel (2018) posits that many parents feel that if the right to equal education is to be meaningful, all the factors that influence educational outcome should be substantially equalized. Only then will the opportunity for all be really equal and the universal right to equal education a reality. It is important to note that it is not possible for everyone to enjoy equal educational outcomes; it is only possible that individuals for whatever reason may make different use of substantially equal conditions for schooling. It is intelligible to accept that there are differences among those that hold academic degrees and there are performance differences among those that are professors.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be agreed that if the issue were merely right to equal education, if men were equally endowed and if the educational processes in respect of all individuals were themselves mechanical, sequential and passive, then the idea of equal education for all would find few opponents in Nigeria. If the fullest development of intellectual potential is one of the nation's educational goals, then marked differences in innate intelligence must be a basic limitation on equality of outcomes.

Reference

- Ade, F. G. (2017). *Africa Religious and Philosophy*. London: Heinennan Publisher.
Ali, D. D. (2020). *The life cycle of friendship*. Nigeria: G. G. Press.
Ayo, C. J. (2016). *Poverty and Economic Growth in Nigeria*. Bauchi: Alhaji and sons Press.
Daniel, V. T. (2018). *A Tool for National Development*. Nigeria: B. B. Press.
Gani, T. U. (2017). *Philosophy of Education: An Analytic Approach*. Lagos: H. K. Press.
Kam, E. Y. (2016). *Four Basic Challenges of Ignored Relationship*. Nigeria: Ali Press.
Mau, H. N. (2017). *The child and creative mind*. Oyo: Calvary Press.

Rethinking the Equality of Educational Opportunities: A Philosophical Dialogue
Samuel Alfayo Boh, Ph.D

- Samuel, Y. D. (2018). *Pathway to Philosophy of Education*. Nigeria: A. A. Press.
- Simon, S. Y. (2018). *International Media and New Technologies*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Victor, K. E. (2017). *A theory of Justice*. Cambridge: Belknap Press.
- Wale, L. A. (2015). *Conflict Management, Issues, Prospects and Problems*. Benin City: R. N. Press.
- Yohanna, R. G. (2012). *The Development of Modern Education*. Nigeria: C.C. Press.